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AUTHOR Larson, Bruce E.
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ABSTRACT

This paper develops an initial theory of teachers' conceptions of classroom discussion. The paper examines the thoughts of six social studies teachers from suburban and urban high schools concerning characteristics and purposes of classroom discussions and factors that seem to influence teachers' uses of these conceptions. In-depth interviews and think-aloud tasks were analyzed using grounded theory's constant-comparative technique. Six conceptions emerged from the analysis of discussion: (1) recitation; (2) teacher-directed conversation; (3) open-ended conversation; (4) a series of challenging questions; (5) guided transfer of knowledge; and (6) practice of verbal interaction. An additional five factors emerged that seemed to influence the teachers' use of these conceptions of discussion. (EH)

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SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHERS' CONCEPTIONS OF DISCUSSION: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

Bruce E. Larson

Western Washington University

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Bruce E. Larson

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to develop an initial theory of teachers' conceptions of classroom discussion. I explored teachers' thinking about characteristics and purposes of classroom discussions, and factors that seem to influence teachers' uses of these conceptions. Six high school social studies teachers participated in this study: three taught in a suburban high school, and three taught in an urban high school. These teachers were purposively selected to permit data collection from a diverse and theoretically interesting sample. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and a think-aloud task, and were analyzed using grounded theory's constant-comparative technique--an inductive method of generating hypotheses that are grounded in data. During the analysis of these data, six conceptions of discussion emerged. Teachers thought of discussion as recitation, teacher-directed conversation, open-ended conversation, a series of challenging questions, guided transfer of knowledge, and as practice at verbal interaction. In addition to these conceptions of discussion, five factors emerged that seemed to influence the teachers' use of these conceptions of discussion. These are briefly outlined. Explanations and excerpts from the data are provided to illustrate each of the conceptions and factors of influence. These hypothetical categories contribute to previous research on discussion by revealing the complexity of teachers' conceptions of discussion, and the importance of the teacher as discussion leader. Implications of these findings for teachers, school administrators, teacher educators, and for researchers who are interested in classroom discussion are also examined.

Social Studies Teachers' Conceptions of Discussion: A Grounded Theory Study

Discussion is a valued educational practice. Contradicting this claim, however, are research findings that suggest discussion is a rarely used in America's classrooms. Recitation persists in classrooms, despite its frequent criticisms (Cazden, 1988; Goodlad, 1984; Hoetker & Ahlbrand, 1969; Stodolsky, Ferguson, & Wimpelberg, 1981). Teachers' infrequent use of classroom discussion, however, is only part of the problem. Often when teachers claim to use discussion, they are in fact using techniques with attributes of recitation. As an example, a teacher talked for 87.8% of the class period during the portion of the lesson he claimed used discussion (Swift & Gooding, 1983). This paper begins an exploration of teachers thinking about classroom discussion.

I report a grounded theory study. My objective was to develop an explanatory theory of teachers' conceptions of discussion. A previous study of a smaller set of teachers reported the first layer of findings about teachers' conceptions of discussion (Larson & Parker, 1996). Additional detailed descriptions from a selection of teachers will lead to the construction of a detailed set of "grounded hypotheses" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). A grounded theory of this sort should be useful to researchers who are studying the persistence of recitation under the guise of discussion, often in lower-track settings, and to school administrators and teachers who are committed to improving instruction. This study is an attempt to refine and elaborate such an emerging theory.

Literature

Conceptions of Classroom Discussion

Using classroom discussion serves several educational purposes because it is a unique form of classroom talk, and a very special group dynamic. Discussion requires students and teacher to talk back-and-forth at a high cognitive and affective level, both with one another and the subject matter being discussed. Dillon explains this by stating, "What they talk about is an issue, some topic that is in question for them. Their talk consists of advancing and examining different proposals over the issue" (1994, p. 7).

In a summary of literature about the use of discussion in instruction, Gall (1985) reported that discussion is an effective way to promote higher level thinking, develop student attitudes, and advance student capability for moral reasoning. In short, discussion provides opportunities for student thoughtfulness about the information received in class. Attempts to suggest the necessary

and sufficient conditions for discussion have been made (Bridges, 1979, 1987; Haroutunian-Gordon, 1991; Miller, 1992), as have characteristics of different types of discussions (Alvermann, O'Brien, and Dillon, 1990; Gall & Gall, 1990; Roby, 1988), and the influence of teacher questions on classroom discussion (Dillon, 1994; Hunkins, 1995; Roby, 1988). These attempts to lay out descriptions of discussion characterize it as a structured conversation among participants who present, examine, compare and understand similar and diverse ideas about an issue (Wilen & White, 1991). This is in sharp contrast to recitation, which is characterized by teacher-dominated classroom talk, and typically entails an interaction process between teacher and students similar to: teacher posed statement/question -> student response -> teacher feedback/evaluation.

Teachers and researchers seem to use the term "discussion," however, when referring to a wide range of classroom activities. Dillon (1984) found discussion often labels many types of teacher-student interaction. Roby (1988) provided an example of different conceptions of discussion, based on the questioning strategies a teacher uses. Discussions range from being highly teacher centered (similar to the recitation definition given above, and labeled by Roby as a "Quiz Show") to highly student centered (labeled by Roby as a "Bull Session"). Bridges (1979, 1987) established a list of conditions he says are necessary if people are to engage in discussion. These conditions include: putting forward more than one point of view about a subject; having discussants who intend to develop their knowledge, understanding, and judgment on the matter being discussed; and, requiring discussants' to hold to certain principles of conduct during discussion. Without adherence to these conditions, Bridges claims "discussion simply cannot take place" (1979, p.26).

While the conceptions suggested by Roby and Bridges assist in developing a theoretical understanding of classroom discussion, there is little empirical research of teachers' conceptions of discussion. Most research relies on observations of classrooms; the focus of research usually is on the external, observable characteristics of discussion. What observations do not necessarily provide are insights into the thought process of teachers. Identifying what teachers think about discussion might reveal how, and why, discussion is used in the classroom.

The actions of teachers in the classroom are influenced, even determined, by teachers' underlying thought processes (Clark & Peterson, 1986). Some researchers suggest that teachers will visualize an activity in their classroom prior to instruction in order to determine whether the activity will "work" in that particular educational context (Yinger & Clark, 1983). In a review of research on teacher thinking, Isenberg (1990) suggested that teachers' thinking may be guided by a "personally held system of beliefs, values, and principles" (p. 324). Further, teachers' reasons for

selecting certain instructional strategies "may not be clearly understood until teachers try explaining their actions" (Isenberg, 1990, p. 324). Examining teachers' conceptions of discussion, rather than observing a classroom discussion, allows teachers to explain their thinking about discussion.

Discussion and Democracy

Democratic societies are dynamic and changing, for democracy is a way of life (Dewey, 1916). In this view, "democracy is not already accomplished, needing only protection, but a path that citizens in a pluralist society try to walk together. It is this commitment that unites them, not a culture, language, or religion" (Parker, 1996, p. 191). Therefore, citizens should not merely *elect* those who will govern them, but *participate* in self governance themselves. This is what has been labeled as "strong" democracy (Barber, 1984, 1989). One of many important roles of a citizen is a willingness and ability to interact with others on matters of common concern. Discussion is the chief medium for this interaction.

Why do public discussions of important issues affecting families, communities, and nation infrequently occur? No simple answer is possible. However, one of the many reasons for a lack of talk could be that citizenship does not require the skill or the "know how" to engage in public talk about important policies or issues (Barber, 1989, 1984). Citizens need competence in the skills of discussion if they are to engage in fruitful interactions in a democratic government (Barber, 1989; Dewey, 1939; Larson, 1995; Larson & Parker, 1996; Lucas, 1976). If skill in discussion can enhance public talk among democratic citizens, then identifying a set of discussion skills is needed. Possible discussion skills include listening (with an ear to considering opposing opinions), clearly making claims, supporting claims with facts, helping a group move through obstacles, critiquing ideas and not individuals (keeping a high respect for human dignity), and developing together a shared understanding of the problem or issue (Barber, 1984; Mathews, 1994; Parker, 1996). Classrooms might be thought of as citizenship laboratories in which students of different race, ethnicity, gender, social class, and ability learn how to engage in discussions with one another on matters of common concern (Dewey, 1916).

Before descriptions and recommendations of classroom discussion proceed much further, it should be helpful to study what teachers think. As it stands, discussion is defined by researchers without benefit of teachers' views. Accordingly, I decided to examine the conceptions of social studies teachers, for whom the recitation/discussion confusion is a very old problem.

The primary research question for this study was:

What are teachers' conceptions of discussion in high school social studies classes?

In addition, I explored four ancillary questions:

Do teachers have more than one conception of discussion?

What characteristics do teachers consider typical of classroom discussions?

What purposes do teachers believe classroom discussions serve?

What factors seem to influence teachers' use of discussion?

Method

Teachers/Informants

A purposive sample of six high social studies teachers was selected for this study. All claimed to use discussion as part of their teaching strategies[1] , and all were nominated by building principals as being thoughtful and effective teachers. Teaching assignments were similar, with each participant teaching one or more of the following high school social studies courses: world history, United States history, current events, American government, sociology, or psychology. The first two are common social studies courses for tenth and eleventh grade, respectively. The last four are courses typically available to students in the twelfth grade as part of a senior social studies requirement.

The participants taught at one of two schools: a suburban, primarily Caucasian, high school (three teachers); or, an urban (inner-city), racially diverse, high school (three teachers). All of the teachers were Caucasians. Teachers at the suburban high school taught either "regular track" or honors classes. Their names are: Alex, Bill, and Cathy.[2] "Alex" is 46 years old and has been a teacher for 22 years. He has both an undergraduate and master's degree in history. He has taught U. S. and world history, as well as advanced placement U.S. history.

"Bill," is 40 years old and a social studies teacher for all his 18 years of teaching. He has an undergraduate and a master's degree in history. He has taught 11th grade U.S. History and 12th grade current events courses.

"Cathy" is 44 years old and has been the social studies department chair. She has been teaching for 22 years. She has an undergraduate degree in English, with a minor in social science, and a master's degree in secondary education. She has taught U.S. and world history, psychology, and sociology.

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[1]This was important because the teachers needed to recall and describe lessons when they used discussion and how they planned for classroom discussion. Since they used discussion frequently, they were able to answer questions such as: what are advantages and disadvantages of discussion, how do teachers believe their students learn with classroom discussions, and why is discussion selected instead of other methods of instruction.

[2]The names of all six teachers are pseudonyms.

Teachers at the urban high school taught either "low track," "regular track," or honors classes. Their names are Deborah, Elaine, and Frank. "Deborah" is 50 years old, and has taught 14 years. She has an undergraduate degree in education with a minor in United States history. She has a special education teaching certificate and a master's in early childhood special education. She has experience as a resource teacher, and has taught U. S. history to students in self-contained, special education classrooms.

"Elaine" is 40 years old and has an undergraduate major in sociology with a minor in history. She has a master's in counseling and a teaching credential in secondary social science. She has taught U. S. history, and sociology.

"Frank" is 55 years old. He has taught for 25 years. He has an undergraduate degree in political science, and a master's degree in educational administration. Frank teaches advanced placement U. S. history courses and honors American government courses, as well as regular-track U. S. history courses.

Data Gathering

Data were of two kinds: responses to an interview schedule and responses during a think-aloud task. The interviews asked teachers directly about their conceptions and definitions of discussion, while the "think aloud" activity required teachers to draw upon their conceptions of discussion. In the interview, teachers described the mental image that came to mind when they heard the term classroom discussion, distinguished between an ideal discussion and an imperfect one, gave examples of discussion, and listed educational rationales for discussion. The think-aloud exercise was an additional technique to explore these teachers' notions of ideal discussions. Following a technique suggested by Anderson (1980), five vignettes of classroom interaction, each a paragraph long, were composed. These drew on Roby's (1988) five-level model described earlier. Each vignette describes a classroom discussion in one of five teachers' classrooms (Jim, Kerry, Jack, Chris, Brian). Jim's vignette describes a "quiz show," Kerry's a "problematical discussion," Jack's an "informational discussion," Chris' a "dialectical discussion," and Brian's a "bull session."

The teachers were asked to order the vignettes from the one most like a discussion in their classroom to the one least like it, thinking aloud and sharing their reasoning all the while. Then, using their top ranked vignette, the teachers were asked to sketch on a seating chart the interaction patterns they thought would occur during such a discussion, again thinking aloud. These lines depicted the verbal interactions between teacher and student, student and teacher, and student and student.

Data Analysis

The analysis of data consisted of the following four stages. First, I generated categories by examining collected data, attempting to identify common themes in the data. This was the constructive phase of data analysis where I read the transcriptions and created initial categories. The second stage involved the integration of categories and their properties. During this stage, I compared similarities and differences among the categories created in stage one. Some categories combined with others that had similar properties. The third stage further integrated the data around fewer, more encompassing categories. This process entailed: creating new categories, refining (sharpening) categories, and elaborating (further illustrating) existing categories. These first three stages did not necessarily follow this linear progression. Typical of this method of analysis, these stages formed a repetitious process of coding, comparing, and refining (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The constant comparison of data led to the fourth stage of data analysis: writing a "theory in-process" of teachers' conceptions of discussion. These conceptions, abstracted from the data, are then available for comparisons with other samples that provided additional sources of data.

Findings/Hypotheses

Conceptions of Discussion

Teachers' conceptions of classroom discussion are varied, and impact the way teachers plan for discussion in the classroom, the purpose of discussion in the classroom, and teacher expectations of discussion. In this section I present the following six conceptions that eventually emerged from the data: discussion as recitation, as a teacher-directed conversation, as an open-ended conversation, as posing challenging questions, as a guided transfer of knowledge, and as practice at verbal interaction. According to the canons of the grounded theory approach, I present these as *hypotheses* that are *grounded* in data and *tentative*, pending additional rounds of data gathering and analysis. As such, they provide an additional layer of understanding of teachers' conceptions of discussion. Because they are hypotheses, I use the present tense and speak generally of "teachers" rather than of "these six teachers." Each conception of discussion is presented along with segments from the interview and think aloud transcripts. I provide data to illustrate each category, and to reveal how the categories were developed. Segments of field notes and quotations provide evidence that the categories are well grounded in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

1. Discussion as Recitation. Teacher-dominated classroom talk characterizes discussion as recitation. Interactions between teacher and student typically follow the three-step pattern that is

detailed in the recitation literature: 1) teacher initiated statement/question; 2) student response; 3) teacher feedback/evaluation. Teachers emphasize its utilitarian value: When they want to "cover" a large amount of information, assess students' understanding, or review for a test, this type of discussion is preferred. A comment by Cathy is illustrative:

> This is not my choice of how discussion is to be used, but it does serve a definite educational purpose if I were reviewing for a test, or after a chapter/unit had been covered. It is an effective way to make sure the students...read the textbook and understand the main points... There are definite times for this use of discussion, and it is not a completely invalid method.

These discussions can be used as "oral quizzes," with each answer receiving immediate attention from the teacher. Because teachers can ask students to produce specific answers to questions, recitation becomes a quick, efficient way to evaluate students.

Elaine reported using recitation during discussions she called "quiz shows." Teams of students competed to answer her questions correctly. She described the interaction and purpose in the following way:

> If we are having a quiz show, where half of the class is on one side and half on the other, then I'll read the question and see who can get the answer. I can cover the same thing [privately with] textbook questions that I cover [publicly with] the quiz show discussions, but they have to prepare for them so their team can win.

Similarly, Deborah, believed that discussion "can be a kind of oral testing...[where you are] trying to find out generally what they know about the topic. You stress 'wrong answer,' 'right answer.'"

When teachers want to control the topic of discussion and transmit specific information, recitation-style discussions are useful. Teachers determine who talks merely by selecting one student over another. Student-to-student interactions rarely occur when teachers ask questions and evaluate student responses. During recitation-style discussions, teachers are able to distribute information to students quickly and efficiently. When teachers are "in a hurry to cover information," they rely on lecture or recitation. In fact, when teachers are not lecturing, this type of discussion is the main way they verbally transmit facts and ideas to students. Through questioning and by providing feedback, teachers are involved in every interaction and are able to transmit particular facts and ideas to students.

2. Discussion as Teacher-Directed Conversation. Another way teachers conceive of discussion is as a conversation that they lead and control. There is more student-student interaction than in recitation, hence more the feel of a conversation; and the conversation is conducted for different purposes: Teachers want their students to understand multiple perspectives, or they want to encourage a deeper understanding of the topic being discussed. Still, the conversation is

tethered to a teacher-selected question or topic. The teacher actively directs the conversation, but allows students to interact more freely. Bill explained its purpose:

> [T]here are also other kinds of discussions that I try to construct that definitely will get students from point A to point B. There is a light bulb that I want to ultimately turn on, whether it's a piece of knowledge, or whether it's a concept I want them to understand.

One way teachers move the conversation along is by prompting and summarizing student comments. For example, Elaine reported that she often follows student comments with the following sentence stem: "So what you are saying is..." By doing so she attempts to highlight those comments pertinent to the question or topic, and downplay those that are not. Alex recounted directing a discussion by continuously referring his students to an opening question (e.g., "Why should we be responsible for the homeless?").

By directing the discussion, teachers control their students' behavior and control the content being covered. This technique is not as "controlling" as recitation, however. Students respond to student-posed questions as well as teacher-posed questions. In addition, the teacher does not provide feedback on every student comment, as is the case during recitations. Still, the teacher's presence is critical to direct the discussion in a predetermined direction.

During these discussions, teachers are actively participating with students as well as correcting and directing them. Teachers insure that everyone has the opportunity to talk, and students rely on their teachers to maintain order. As Elaine said:

> I don't think I could step away from my class every day and have it [their discussion] be as rich. So that is the real role of the teacher--to guide. [W]hen we begin to discuss [controversial] topics or questions, I suppose that I am the chief facilitator in that a lot of times the students get all caught up in the topic. They know if they raise their hands...I will acknowledge them, so they won't just sit there and worry about never talking. I make sure there is order.

Frank directs students toward several points of view without "parading" the facts past them during a lecture. His role was critical to the discussion because he encouraged students to talk and react to his comments and ideas. Teachers direct discussions in an attempt to expose their students to multiple perspectives on a topic, and to determine how well students understand perspectives other than their own. Some of the perspectives are presented when students share their own points of view, findings from personal reading, and result of their research. Cathy 's goal, for example, was not to reach a consensus or draw a conclusion but to "engage" students and draw out their ideas about the topic. She thought this helped her students, as burgeoning citizens, to understand one another's viewpoints.

Teachers prod and question students in an attempt to direct them toward more fact-based opinions. Or, as Deborah found, during discussion "I think you hear yourself saying things you didn't know you thought. Talking clarifies your thinking, your thoughts."

Teachers also direct discussions by providing scripts, or roles, for students to assume during the classroom interactions. The roles themselves serve as a constant guide for the interactions. Bill set up "contrived" discussions from particular time periods in American history, and then used role-playing and questions to challenge students' understanding of how decisions were made and what people believed. For example, his students role-played discussions among congressmen in 1789. Students researched a role, assumed that character, then reenacted a congressional hearing. Some students represented people from the present day as well, and entered the discussion by bringing knowledge that was different or unknown in the 1700s. As this diverse group tried to question, negotiate, and converse on a specific topic, students addressed multiple points of view across multiple eras of history. These roles served as a constant guide for the interactions during the classroom discussions.

3. Discussion as Open-Ended Conversation. Teachers do not always direct discussions or evaluate student responses. During open-ended discussions, teachers verbally interact with their students as participants. Teacher and students alike make comments and offer opinions. At times open-ended discussions turn into debates and heated arguments. Students often will leave class "mad at each other and mad at me," according to Alex. Bill maintained that open-ended discussions provide students with "tremendous freedom to explore ideas":

> [The teacher] is not telling them [the students] what avenue they have to follow. I mean they may start talking about document "Y" but may end up in what seems to an outsider a completely unrelated area. And I don't have any problem with that. I think it helps students understand that their world is interconnected, that mature, intellectual ideas are interconnected.

Open-ended discussions offer students the opportunity to experience a free flow of ideas, and to enjoy this flow. As Elaine said:

> A lot of times they [students] will still be talking about the issue on the way out the door. And I like that because that shows me that the discussion meant something to them.

By interacting with students, teachers attempt to model *how* to participate in open-ended discussions. Part of what they model is enthusiasm about the topic of discussion and enjoyment of the discussion process itself. Open-ended discussions also provide students with a safe environment in which to tackle controversial issues in a diverse group. Such interactions are important to teachers because they feel their students need this experience. As Bill said:

> You're building confidence. Most of these people [referring to his students] don't have the confidence right now to stand up in front of the school board meeting or public library committee....I really don't care where the students are in terms of opposing or supporting [a topic] when we're all done with this twenty-minute discussion.

Cathy made roughly the same point:

> They know a lot of things. But they haven't the experience. So sometimes we bounce it off each other for the experience. I try to be fairly neutral.

Teachers view open-ended discussions as a close approximation of "adult" conversations--or conversations in which participants can freely share what they know about a given topic. During them, the teacher does not feel obligated to offer input or guidance. "A lot of times I don't even get to provide my point of view, but that doesn't really matter," said Elaine. Deborah, emphasizing the need for students to interact with one another, added that the teacher should only "prod occasionally, once the discussion starts."

It is important to note that open-ended conversations center on a particular concept, piece of information, or question. While they may have an open end, they do not have an open beginning. When asked if discussions were open for any topic that the students wanted to talk about, teachers quickly respond that the value of open-ended discussions is the freedom students had to talk about a subject or issue in any *way* they wanted, not necessarily on any *topic* they wanted. Teachers carefully select the topic to be discussed, deciding whether it meets two criteria: It must fit into the curriculum, and be a topic about which the students already know something. Elaine recounted an example of showing a ten-minute clip from the television show "20/20" to initiate student thinking about gender inequities in the workplace. She followed this with a question "to provide a definite starting spot" for the discussion, then she became a participant with her students. Bill's comment illustrates this further:

> These young people can't walk in just cold, [with the teacher] saying "OK, just talk." There's something that is predetermining the topic of discussion. The teacher has to provide the students with some form of a catalyst--a reading, a quot[ation], a passage--and they're supposed to read it, consider it, and be super critical of it before they walk into the arena [classroom]. If it's just a discussion for the sake of discussion, it...would be a nice homeroom class activity, but not necessarily an academic activity.

4. Discussion as Posing Challenging Questions. While teachers frequently combine questioning and discussion, the purpose of this conception of discussion is to challenge students' beliefs and ideas. Discussion as posing challenging questions differs from discussion as recitation because teachers are not seeking particular answers. It differs from teacher-directed conversations

because teachers' questions are not intended to guide students or lead them to a certain end point. It differs from open-ended conversations because teachers continue to pose specific questions throughout the discussion; their role is as questioner rather than participant. Five teachers in the sample called this the "Socratic method" of teaching, and each claimed to use it.

For Elaine, questions "challenge" and "puzzle" students and encourage them to "request information they have not thought about--more details or different perspectives." Teachers often refer to using a "Socratic dialogue" with their students. They involve themselves in a discussion by posing challenging questions to students, and commonly answer student questions with additional questions. Bill, for example, said he often rephrased his students' statements as questions in an attempt to spur a reaction from them:

> I see myself coming in and engaging people in almost a Socratic dialogue...Throw questions, prompt. I do that an awful lot in...large groups especially. I do a lot of role-playing...where I take on a persona, I take on a position that I know will spark a reaction from the audience. And I at times take that to the extreme. It's my opportunity in class to be an actor, and basically to elicit dialogue and a reaction from them [with questions]. But not in a chaotic sense. Again, with some structure so that whether it's a reaction of an individual or a small group of people, other folks are in the background listening to that...and then having an equal opportunity to react. I see my role at times in helping them paraphrase one another's reactions [by asking repeated questions].

Teachers seem willing to pose provoking questions as long as they encourage deeper thought about the topic being discussed. Bill's reference to challenging students for the purpose of "spark(ing) a reaction" in the above quotation provided a good example of this approach. Questions direct students' thinking about a topic, but their answers are not the end goal. The real goal is to encourage the process of thinking about a topic, through questioning.

Teachers also play "the Devil's advocate" with students, often questioning anything that is said. Alex reported that he assumed this role, hoping his students would "logic through the information and be more thoughtful about the ideas they formed." His emphasis was on eliciting "logic," rather than emotion. Deborah said it was all right to take an "opposing view if you have to," but she was concerned about students becoming offended when she did. She told her students that she was not necessarily identifying with the opposition, but was representing the thinking from it. Instead of starting with "I think...," she used "What if I thought...?"

> I guess I use [this approach] because I am trying to get them to see that there are other points of view because they [the students' perspectives] are so narrow...they often come from very narrow backgrounds, so they hide behind this "I know this is right" attitude. So I will say something like, "Well, what if it were different than you believe?"

Teachers think this conception is useful when they detect that their students are biased, have not considered other points of view, or have a shallow understanding of what is being discussed. In each case, the questions intend to expand student thinking. Since teachers want students to examine their own understanding and opinions, teachers need to loosen their control over the interactions. As Cathy suggested, teachers are faced with a dilemma between wanting students to think on their own and wanting to lead students to a particular conclusion:

> Sometimes I hope they will [answer in certain ways, or answer certain questions], but they don't always...and I will accept that...I will accept what they come up with.

The purpose, thus is to challenge, rather than direct, student thinking.

5. Discussion as Guided Transfer of Knowledge. Teachers hope students will take into the world knowledge that is formed initially in the classroom. Discussion, when used to help students with this transfer, involves the generalization of knowledge acquired in school to non-school settings. These discussions engage students in a process of generalizing from particular facts and details to the circumstances in the larger world around them.

The role of teachers during discussion as guided transfer is similar to the role described for "teacher-directed" conversations, in that the teacher, more than the students, guides the discussion. It is different in that the objective is for each student to consider how school knowledge might prove useful in their life. Herein lies the distinctive value of these discussions: the very act of discussing allows students to connect what they learn in school to their own life in ways other methods of instruction may not be able to help them do. As Cathy said, it involves students "in problem solving...the talk is about what is in the book and is then applied to current events" (emphasis hers). She continued:

> [My] main point for discussion is that...you can effectively use the inductive process. How does what we learned about "there and then" relate today? How is it similar, how is it different, and what are some conclusions we can draw?

In other words, the process of discussing encourages students to carry historical and background knowledge (the "there and then") from school settings to their lives outside of school (the "here and now").

When linking historical events to the present, students and teacher discuss not only to learn about a particular historical event, but to learn how that event has affected the present. It is the process of discussing that provides the learning. Again, Cathy explained:

> We can take an idea that is presented in the material, and then allow the students to explore the ideas, the consequences, the ramifications of the things that they hadn't

> considered in just straight textbook-ordered, formal presentation..., a lecture or film, or if you did a worksheet for the reading.

Similarly, Alex reported using discussions to help students "make analogies and...connections between the past and the present." Perennial problems, he believed, affect us repeatedly over time. He used discussion to help his students recognize links between problems that seem unconnected on the surface, but share a similar underlying problem. Bill commented similarly, "I am a real proponent of taking what you do in class and making sure there is a link to the political realm. A real, not a make-believe, a real link."

For Alex, these discussions require students to develop a "higher level of thinking skills" about the subject under discussion. He described higher-order thinking as the ability to organize a collection of information about one topic so it could inform a different, related topic. For Bill this meant that students could "synthesize" their knowledge to make it clear to others. Students have to put several different ideas together in their own words. Students' comments then represented this reformulation of their knowledge. Bill offered additional insight: "if they can do it in this artificial environment, then I think I'm guaranteed...that they will then continue those kinds of dialogues at their places of employment, at the dinner table at home, or in a public forum. (emphasis his)

Additionally, the process of discussing, teachers believe, increases student motivation to make connections between what they talk about in school and what is happening in the world around them. Elaine referred to this directly when she said, "Discussion causes students to feel they have a voice now, and they start taking interest in Time magazine or reading the newspaper because it has something in it that we talked about in class." She continued:

> Parents have given me lots of positive feedback because their kids are coming home and talking about stuff that they learned. Because now it's their own. They heard another person say something that they disagree with, or that they don't know about, and suddenly they are motivated to go check it out.

The result of this motivation is more in-depth learning about a topic, which helps students recognize connections between topics and concepts rather than merely comparing facts.

6. Discussion as Practice at Verbal Interactions. Classroom discussions are not always used to teach subject-specific content. Teachers at times plan discussions so students may practice engaging in verbal interactions with one another. They believe that students become better discussants when they watch the teacher model appropriate behavior during a discussion, then receive opportunities to practice engaging in discussions. Under this conception, teachers think of discussion as a skill that requires practice sessions. Bill explained that "[Discussion] is nothing you walk into. It is something you literally teach the students to do over a period of time."

This conception is similar to "discussion as open-ended conversation," but their purposes are different. Open-ended conversations begin around a teacher-determined topic or question, then diverge so students can experience the free-flow of ideas often present in adult conversations. "Practice discussions," by comparison, may or may not begin around a teacher-determined topic or question. The primary purpose is to develop in students the interaction skills they need for discussions.

Teachers justify the departure from course curriculum and use of class time for this practice because they believe students need experience talking and interacting with one another. Their hope is that future discussions, about issues more pertinent to the curriculum, will be more refined as a result of the practice sessions.

Teachers will not stop practice-discussions when they digress from the course curriculum. They believe such digressions provide further practice in developing skills needed for linguistic interactions. Students are able to discuss most any topic of their choosing, since the purpose is to develop skill at interacting verbally. Frank explained:

> I let it [discussion] go where the students like, because as long as I can see that people are scratching their head and thinking, and that they have some point of view that others might react to, that's fine with me and I'll let them continue. We are often going off in another direction. But I would guess that someone coming into the class cold, or someone who didn't spend every day with us might say "what the heck is going on?" But I don't care, as long as I can see that they are engaged in what's happening in here and get something out of it.

Teachers are concerned, however, about teaching subject matter (i.e., U. S. history teachers want to teach U. S. history). Bill, for example, said he tried to connect his practice-interactions to course content. To him, a practice discussion was a "structured dialogue" where students "talk together" with him. He put his students in a situation,

> that will allow, encourage, almost require students to talk with one another about a particular topic. Could be in a small group setting, or could be a student-led large group discussion...You know I have, in the U. S. history classes, lots of discussions in that I don't lecture...we do a lot of talking together about historical events, time periods, peoples, but there is a lot of structured dialogue there as well.

Teachers have surprisingly few rules for students during these practice discussions, other than to listen and respect their classmates' rights to share their opinions and ideas. They often do not teach a specific list of "do's and don't's." Teachers emphasize the intent of rules, rather than the rules themselves. Elaine accomplished this through explicit instruction:

> I spend a lot of time at the beginning of class teaching them about respect and about listening, and that it is important to have a voice and also to let others to have a voice, and the whole process of discernment.

Alex recalled telling his students to respect others and not offend classmates:

> It's very essential that they respect each others' ideas...I tell them I don't care what you say as long as it's not personal, against anyone here at school, anybody in this classroom, against your teacher, and it's within good taste, you can go ahead and say it.

The practice from these discussions helps classroom interactions.

Summary of Teachers' Conceptions of Discussion

Below is a thumbnail description of the six conceptions. Illustrative statements from my sample are included after each.

1. Discussion as recitation. Teacher asks questions, students respond, and teacher evaluates responses. Information is distributed quickly and efficiently: "If I were reviewing for a test...or wanted to make sure students had read the textbook and understand the main points presented, I will lead a discussion [that seeks specific answers to questions]." Cathy

2. Discussion as teacher-directed conversation. Teachers direct a conversation with students to help students understand a topic or "point." Students are encouraged to contribute any information they know, and teacher judges its relevance to the lesson's objective. "There are...discussions that I try to construct that definitely will get students from point A to point B. There is a light bulb that I want to ultimately turn on, whether it's a piece of knowledge, or a concept I want them to understand." Bill

3. Discussion as open-ended conversation. Teacher and students freely share what they know about a predetermined topic. These discussions become debates or heated arguments over a limited number of points. Teachers introduce the topic, then participate in the discussion but do not direct it. "[D]uring the discussion, [students] fed off of each other. That's what discussion ought to be. It ought to be people who are just bursting with a contribution or a question that leads to something else." Deborah

4. Discussion as challenging questions. Teachers pose questions to students but do not evaluate responses. Instead, additional questions are asked to challenge and puzzle student assumptions and logic, and to develop thinking skills. This type of discussion is often equated with a technique called the "Socratic Method." "Ask questions, and never give any answers, but pose problems in questions and not draw things to a close." Cathy

5. Discussion as guided transfer of knowledge. Teacher and students apply knowledge of the past to the present, and transfer knowledge acquired in class to other situations and circumstances. Teachers act as a guide and help students generalize particular facts and ideas to the

larger world around them. "How does what we learned about 'there and then' relate today? How is it similar, how is it different, and what are some conclusions we can draw?" Cathy

6. Discussion as practice at verbal interaction. Teachers think of discussion as a skill that requires practice. They believe that students become better discussants when they receive both modeling from the teacher about appropriate behavior during a discussion, and opportunities to practice engaging in discussions. "[Discussion] is nothing you walk into. It is something you literally teach the students to do over a period of time." Bill

Influences on Teachers' Conceptions of Discussion

While the purpose of this paper is to report on teachers' conceptions of classroom discussion, a number of influences on these conceptions emerged during the analysis. Here I present a brief description of these influences because they appear to be integral to the conceptions. I give their labels and brief descriptions, again with illustrations drawn from the data.

1. Student diversity. Teachers recognize that students in a classroom are not identical. They come together each class period with differences in cultural background, ethnicity, gender, race, learning styles, and ability. Teachers see classroom diversity positively and negatively, and often weigh these differences when planning classroom discussions.

2. Lesson objectives. Discussion is considered to be a time-consuming method of instruction relative to other methods. As a result, teachers are more likely to dominate classroom interactions when the objectives of a lesson emphasize learning a specific body of information in a specific amount of time. Teachers who plan discussions so students will build their own understanding during the interactions allow for the extra time needed during discussions.

3. Age and maturity of students. Teachers do not use discussion in the same way across their several classes. They discriminate, more likely conducting discussion in classes that have what they call more "mature" students--students they describe as some combination of older, more knowledgeable, less defensive, and more socially adept. More maturity is needed when the purpose of the verbal interactions is to express different perspectives and increase the students' general understanding about a particular topic.

4. Sense of community in the classroom. The sense of community that teachers and students perceive in the classroom affects discussion. When teacher and students view the class as a community, they are more inclined to interact with one another. "Community" is comprised of attributes such as: trust and respect for one another, feelings of personal safety, an appropriate size of the group, and common goals for exploring issues and course-content together.

5. Interest level of students. In order for discussion to work in the classroom, students need to have an interest in the topic being discussed, and they must believe that discussion is a worthwhile method of instruction. Teachers consider very seriously their students' interest level in the discussion topic. If they determine a low level of interest, then discussion is not used. Likewise, if students do not value discussion as a method of instruction, then teachers will use less-interactive methods of instruction.

Implications

What this study has provided, in short, is insight into teacher thinking about classroom discussion. Teachers' conceptions of discussion and the factors that influence the use of these conceptions have received little research attention; the theoretical categories presented here help to fill this gap and set the stage for the development of a more formal theory about teachers and discussion. Here, I focus on four aspects of this study that contribute to research on conceptions of classroom discussion.

Complexity of Conceptions

Teachers have multiple conceptions of discussion. This may explain why prior research has claimed that teachers will label any teacher-student interaction as "discussion" (Cazden, 1988; Dillon, 1984, 1990; Gall & Gall, 1990; Wilen, 1990). This conclusion, however, does not fully credit teachers with the amount of thought they give to classroom interactions. On the surface, teachers will call most classroom interactions discussion, but in their mind they differentiate between different types of discussion, with each having specific characteristics and purposes. Teachers think differently about discussion based on what they hope to accomplish during a lesson.

Teachers do consider recitation to be a type of discussion, but this is not their only conception. They also use discussion to accomplish higher-level cognitive goals such as understanding multiple perspectives, building knowledge, and developing thinking skills. They see value in the process of discussing as well as in the product or outcome of the discussion. Teachers believe it is the talk that occurs during discussion that helps students understand a particular topic better. Barnes' (1992) recommended the same use of discussion when he claimed that we talk our way into insight through "rough draft" and "final draft" talk.

Leading Discussion

Teachers believe that their leadership role during classroom discussion is critical to the success of the discussion. While this does not imply that teachers want to control all of the

interactions, it does imply that teachers are not always comfortable with a role equal to that of student/participant. Teachers report that they lead differently depending on the conception of discussion to which they are adhering. They are, however, very involved in the classroom interactions regardless of the type of discussion taking place. The classroom teacher's participation is critical to the success of the classroom discussion. The self-perceived roles of teachers during recitation-style discussions are apparent: teachers determine what information is important, distribute it to the class, and evaluate students--typically with questions. Their role changes for other conceptions, but does not lessen in importance. Even when teachers assume more the role of participant with students, they reported involvement in the interactions that are still different from the students because they regularly model appropriate behavior, assess the accuracy of information being presented by students, and act as a monitor to insure the discussion serves the purpose for which it was planned.

Teachers

There are two primary implications of this study for classroom teachers. First, teachers who use discussion can compare their own thinking about discussion with the conceptions that emerged from the teachers I examined. Since teachers will probably not separate discussion into six categories, the list of conceptions may provide them with a new framework for thinking about different types of classroom discussion. Teachers might then engage in a form of "action research" where they compare teacher and student roles, characteristics, and purposes of their classroom discussions with my research findings. A purpose of these comparisons could be to improve teachers' understanding of discussion so that it is used more frequently during instruction.

A second implication for teachers has to do with their involvement in the discussion. Planning and leading a discussion is a complex task for teachers. Their role during each conception of discussion is critical to the purpose of the discussion, even when discussion appears to be student driven (e.g., when it encourages student-to-student interactions). Before the discussion begins teachers should determine what their role will be and how they will facilitate the types of interactions they want to have. Though teachers' involvement will vary depending on the type of discussion, the teacher's presence during the interactions is important to the success of the discussion.

Administrators and Teacher Educators

Teacher educators and school administrators should consider teaching the discussion method because of its potential to enhance student learning and democratic citizenship. Through classroom discussions, students might develop abilities to interact with others about issues of

common interest. This is critical for a democratic system of government that values input from its citizens. Students, thought of as citizens-in-process, might learn how to engage in discussions with classmates of different races, genders, social status, and abilities. Teaching future teachers about using discussion as a method of instruction is an important step in democratic citizenship education. As a starting point, teacher educators might examine purposes and characteristics of the six conceptions with teachers, and discuss which one(s) could best attain outcomes closely associated with democratic citizenship.

Additionally, constructivist thought suggests that students learn subject matter better when they are required to organize it themselves and develop an individualized understanding of the concepts being taught. Several conceptions of discussion (teacher-directed conversations, posing challenging questions, and guided transfer of knowledge) encourage this type of learning. Discussion is a valuable tool for teachers to have in their collection of instructional methods, especially in light of long standing calls for educators to teach problem-solving skills and to promote conceptual understanding of material. Using classroom discussion, however, is a difficult task for teachers. Instructing pre-service and in-service teachers explicitly about discussion, and the factors that influence discussion, could encourage its effective use in the classroom.

Conclusion

This study poses a number of implications for teacher education, the classroom teacher, and future educational research. On the theoretical level, this study provides empirical support for models about conceptions of discussion. This fills a gap in conceptual models of teachers' conceptions of discussion by offering knowledge grounded in data. If discussion is to be used in the classroom, then we must know what teachers think about it, how they plan to use it, and what purposes it serves in the classroom. On the practical level, by establishing a basic set of conceptions, this research allows teacher education, and the classroom teacher, to be on the "same page" conceptually when referring to discussion. The literature review of Wilen and White (1991) reveals that characteristics of discussion in the classroom are not widely known. It is important to develop some idea of what teachers envision as discussion before descriptions of discussion in the classroom proceed much further.

I have attempted to initiate an understanding of teachers' conceptions of discussion. Six conceptions were developed along with five influences. Companion studies are needed, of course, in other subject areas and settings, and as a consequence some conceptions and influences will be

eliminated and others added. Teachers and supervisors can reflect upon classroom practices, and teacher educators can provide instruction on discussion itself as they reflect on the hypotheses that develop.

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